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A POSSIBLE SOURCE FOR POE'S "THE TELL-TALE HEART"
AND "THE BLACK CAT"

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EDGAR ALLAN POE met Charles Dickens on the latter's first trip to America. He is definitely known to have been familiar with Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge*; and he probably knew several others of the English novelist's great novels and stories, widely popular as they were in this country. What has never been noted thus far is a striking similarity in the plots of two of Poe's most celebrated short stories, "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," and that of Dickens's story entitled "The Clock-Case: A Confession Found in a Prison in the Time of Charles the Second," published by him in *Master Humphrey's Clock* in April, 1840.¹

A brief résumé of the latter will help to make clear the points of resemblance:

A retired army officer, on the eve of execution, makes full confession of a murder. Always of a sullen and distrustful nature from childhood, he was the opposite in temperament of his brother. Married to two sisters, the brothers always presented a striking contrast, and marriage ties estranged them further. The brother's wife knew him well, and the officer felt her knowledge of his every emotion and knew her eyes were upon him; her fixed look always haunted him. She and her husband died, leaving their four-year-old son to the care of the officer and his wife. The child, who resembled his mother, always mistrusted his uncle, who soon began to feel uneasy whenever the child was by, conscious of being closely and purposefully watched by him, as previously by his mother. He could never look the child down. Very gradually came the idea of causing the boy's death, and the officer felt a fascination which drew him to watch the childish figure and ponder how easily murder might be done. He would steal upstairs and watch him sleeping; or hover near him in the garden. Finally he whittled out a toy boat, dropping it in the child's way and waiting for him to sail it on a sheet of water nearby. After three days the child finally ran down to the stream. The officer stole after, and, coming up behind him, sank upon his knee to thrust him in. The child saw the shadow in the water and turned around, his mother's ghost looking from his eyes. The sun burst forth and all the world had eyes to see the murder done. The child ran toward

¹ Charles Dickens, *Master Humphrey's Clock* (London, 1840-1841), I, 32-36.

the house, crying out that he would try to love his uncle, but the officer struck him down with his sword. Then he laid the body in a thicket and planned to bury it that night in the garden. In his absorption in hiding the deed, he forgot all else. At the news that the boy was missing, he sent servants to search, trembling at each man's return. That night he secretly buried the corpse in the garden and saw a glowworm gleaming on its breast, like the visible spirit of God, an eye of fire looking up to Heaven. Then he later broke the news to his wife and himself sat always at the window, watching the spot which hid the dreadful secret. This was in a piece of ground newly dug up and about to be turfed; and as the men worked there, he would urge them to hurry, frantically treading down the turf himself, till the men thought he must be mad. That night he dreamed of parts of the body sticking up through the plot of grass; the awakening from still another dream that the child was yet alive was an even worse horror. Thus for three days the officer continuously watched the burial spot. On the fourth came several fellow officers to call. Even then he could not bear to lose sight of the place; therefore he invited the guests to have their wine in the garden and sat down with his chair exactly over the grave, trying to drink and converse. Haltingly relating the loss of the child, he became terrified at the idea of the possible suspicions of his guests and even asked if they suspected murder. Suddenly two great bloodhounds leaped into the garden. The officer felt for what reason they had come and grasped firmly the arms of his chair. The dogs circled nearer and nearer, finally tearing at the wooden rails of the chair that prevented their reaching the ground. The faces of the visitors reflected their realization of some horror. When the murderer boldly refused to leave the spot, they seized him and forced him away, struggling and biting, after which the dogs tore up the earth, tossing it into the air. The officer fell upon his knees and confessed, and after his trial wrote this memoir while awaiting execution.

A consideration of the close similarities between the three stories, both in idea and in wording, will perhaps fall readily under the following general headings:

(1) Inception of the idea of the murder. All three murderers find it impossible to say how or when the idea originated, but admit it to have been haunting and irresistible.

(2) Motivation of the deed by the *eye*. The murderer in Dickens's story is haunted by the eye and look, first of the mother and then of the child; in "The Tell-Tale Heart," by the vulture eye, the "Evil Eye"; in "The Black Cat" by the empty socket of the eye cut out by the penknife. It is interesting to note the suggestion of the evil eye in these tales. Poe

actually employs the terms, and Dickens uses the verb “overlook,” which the *New English Dictionary* defines as “to look upon with the ‘evil eye,’ to bewitch. (The most common word for this in the popular sense.)” Dickens also speaks of the *bright* eyes of the child.

(3) Aspects leading up to or following the murder. (a) Each victim is soothed, and an attempt is made to allay his fears, in Dickens’s story by the toy boat; in “The Tell-Tale Heart” by daily inquiries after the old man’s health, a cheery morning’s greeting, etc. (b) The bodies of the victims are disposed of artfully, the child being buried in ground newly dug up, and the cat with the corpse in a wall newly plastered. (c) Each murderer acts with zeal to find who actually did the deed and thus to draw suspicion from himself. Dickens’s officer sends servants in all directions; the husband in “The Black Cat” greets the police cordially and tells them to search well, taking them from corner to corner in the house; the slayer in “The Tell-Tale Heart” leads them likewise through his rooms in a friendly way. (d) Interpretation of the deed by outsiders. The army officer in Dickens’s story helps tread down the turf so eagerly that the men must have thought him mad. Poe keeps repeating: “. . . why will you say I am mad? . . . How, then, that I am mad. . . .”

(4) Dramatic disclosure of the real murderer. The officer (Dickens’s), after a three-day state of fear, greets his visitors on the fourth day; Poe’s character in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is disturbed at four A.M., and in “The Black Cat” on the fourth day by police. Most significant is the fact that Dickens’s murderer invites his guests to the garden to the very burial spot and there places his chair *upon the grave*; just as Poe’s, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” placed his, likewise, directly over the spot under which the corpse lay; all three men exhibit the same air of bravado, the one in “The Black Cat” striking on the wall covering his victim, to his final undoing. In Dickens’s story, when the officer is finally forced from his chair, the dogs tear up the earth beneath, just as the officers in “The Black Cat” tear down the bricks.

Perhaps the quotation of a few striking parallel passages may make the above suggestions even more emphatic. Readers will note that similarity in phrasing is indicated by quotation marks; in idea, by brackets.

DICKENS	“THE TELL-TALE HEART”	“THE BLACK CAT”
CONFESSION ON EVE OF EXECUTION	CONFESSION	CONFESSION ON EVE OF EXECUTION
1. “I can scarcely fix the date when the feeling first came upon me . . . but I do not	“It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once con-	

think that when this began I meditated to do him any wrong. . . . Neither did the idea come upon me at once, but by very slow degrees . . . then coming to be part and parcel . . . of my daily thoughts. . . ."
 "... a question of means and safety. . . ."

ceived, it haunted me day and night."

2. "... a fascination . . . to contemplate his . . . figure. . . . Sometimes I would steal up-stairs and watch him as he slept. . . ."

"... how wisely I proceeded—with what caution —with what foresight . . . I went to work!"

"... I never raised my eyes at such times but I found hers [mother's] fixed upon me. . . . I felt that she overlooked me always. . . . she haunted me; her fixed and steady look comes back upon me now like the memory of a dark dream and makes my blood run cold."

"... every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept."

"... I soon began to be uneasy when this child was by. I never roused myself . . . but I marked him looking at me: not with mere childish wonder, but with something of the purpose and meaning that I had so often noted in his mother. . . . I never could look the boy down. . . . he would keep his bright eyes on me still."

"I think it was his eye!"
 "... to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever."
 "Whenever it fell on me, my blood ran cold. . . ."

"I took . . . a pen knife . . . and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!"
 [Socket of lost eye was frightful to look at, but dread kept man from killing the cat.]

3. [Orders search made for the child.]
 [Puts body in thicket and then buries it at night.]
 [Chooses newly-dug-up ground.]

[Could not commit the murder till the eye was open] "... for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye."

[Helps searchers in cellar. Tries to allay suspicions.]
 [Walls up body.]

"The men who laid down the grass must have thought me mad."

"... why *will* you say that I am mad. . . . You fancy me mad."²

[Chooses newly plastered wall.]

4. [In state of fear for three days. On fourth day fellow officers come to call.]
 [Friendly manner. Takes chair and wine into garden.]

[Police arrive at 4:00 A.M.]

[Fearful for three days. Officers arrive on fourth day.]

[Ease of manner. Smiles. Bids them search well. Offers chairs and bids them rest.]

[Is confident in his security and walks about easily.]

"Then I sat down *with my chair upon the grave*. . . ."²

"... while I myself . . . placed my own seat upon

[Goes to very spot and raps on wall.]

the very spot beneath
which reposed the corpse
of the victim."

[Dogs tear up earth beneath
chair and toss it in air.]

[Officers tear down brick
wall.]

It may be observed, perhaps, that although premeditation, murder, and disposal of the body are frequent accompaniments in real life to a crime, it is the actual parallel in the sequence of events and circumstances in the three stories that is of significance here. A direct borrowing on the part of Poe would therefore constitute a plausible explanation for this far-reaching resemblance.

On the other hand, if this assumption be granted, it will furnish us a *terminus post quem* for the two American stories. They cannot have been written prior to April, 1840, the date of the publication of Dickens's story. The known chronology of Poe's works would seem to be in accord with the solution suggested above.³

One point more should deserve mention. *Barnaby Rudge*, which Poe is known to have read and appreciated, also appeared in *Master Humphrey's Clock*. Possibly Poe obtained the periodical from England. At all events, neither O. A. Roobach's *Bibliotheca Americana* 1820-52 nor F. L. Mott's *History of American Magazines* 1741-1850 mentions an American reprint of the periodical.

THE DEATH'S-HEAD ON THE GOLD-BUG

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IN 1910, Ellison A. Smyth, Jr., published his article "Poe's *Gold Bug* from the Standpoint of an Entomologist,"¹ in which he asserted that the gold-bug was but "the blending of several beetles into the one composite insect deemed necessary for the purposes of the tale."² According to Professor Smyth's article, the beetles blended into the one composite were only insects which Poe supposedly saw during his stay at Fort Moultrie, near Sullivan's Island. Ever since that article, scholars in American literature have generally accepted the entomologist's supposition and apparently have given the inter-

² Italics are in the text.

³ Cf. Hervey Allen, *Israel* (New York, 1926), II, 567.

¹ *Sewanee Review*, XVIII, 67-72 (Jan., 1910).

² *Ibid.*, p. 68.